

NEGRO SLAVERY IN WISCONSIN.¹

BY JOHN NELSON DAVIDSON, A. M.

"It is a free country. No slavery can be admitted here." Thus, in 1833, Rev. David Lowrey wrote of what was soon to be Wisconsin.² And at the centennial celebration of the settlement of Marietta, Ohio, April 7, 1888, Senator George F. Hear, speaking of the old Northwest Territory and the states that have succeeded it, used these words: "Here was the first human government under which absolute civil and religious liberty has always prevailed. Here no witch was ever hanged or burned. No heretic was ever molested. Here no slave was ever born or dwelt. When older states or nations, where the chains of human bondage have been broken, shall utter the proud boast, 'With a great price I obtained this freedom!' each sister state of this imperial group, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin, may lift up her queenly head with the yet prouder answer, 'But I was free born!'"

We could wish that these statements were entirely accurate. It is true that the witchcraft delusion, that has slain its hundreds of thousands of victims in Germany, France, Britain, and its twenty or more even in our own land, found none here.³ But negroes were actually held as slaves in Indiana, Illinois, and even in Wisconsin. Doubtless there were some also in Ohio.

¹ Address delivered before the State Historical Society of Wisconsin at its fortieth annual meeting, December 8, 1892.

² See *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, xii., p. 405, for a sketch of David Lowrey, D. D., then in charge of the Winnebago school at Prairie du Chien.—R. G. THWAITES.

³ In 1779 there was a witchcraft panic among the French creoles at Cahokia, Ill. Two negro slaves were condemned to be hanged, and another to be burned alive while chained to a post, on the charge of practising sorcery; there is, however, no evidence that the sentence was carried out.—R. G. T.

ety with which he was so long identified. His record is one of able, faithful, unpretending, but never-tiring service. It was mainly foundation work, which is necessarily out of sight but which ought never to be out of mind.

Mr. Durrie's zeal was the more intense and tireless from his view of the institution he helped build up. That institution to his mind was not for a day but for all time. It was a vast reservoir ever in filling but never full. It was destined to preserve history in all its branches — details that otherwise would be lost, and thenacked and lamented forever. It was to widen its scope with the growth of the state. This reservoir was never to know stagnation, but was to shoot out streams making glad thirsty pilgrims from every quarter. The Society was to be receptive of all improvements in its methods. It was to be enshrined in surroundings more and more suitable. Its officers and members must change, superannuate, and die,— but it was itself to know no change, no decay, no death, blooming forever in youth or rejuvenescence. Its emblem was to be a tree which in its latest growth embodies that of all former years. Or he would perhaps term it a pyramid longer in growing than the piles of Egypt, and destined to last as long as those "wild enormities of ancient magnanimity."

In domestic relations Mr. Durrie's lot was enviable. His wife survived well-nigh up to her golden wedding, and of his six children only one died before him, and that one had been for a score of years his constant and congenial companion in bibliothecal toils. His last sickness was almost his first. Scarcely one day in a year was he unable to be at his post of duty.

Early in April, 1892, he was prostrated by paralysis. From this he rallied, but never enough to enter the library again. Two days before his death — which was on the last day of August — I saw him sitting in comfort on his porch. His only regret was that his right hand had lost its cunning in writing for the library. The Christian faith he had confessed in his youth sustained him in age, with its earthly consolations and its immortal hopes.

It is from the lips of living witnesses that I have part of the story of negro slavery in Wisconsin. One of these is more than a witness; he is doubtless the only living man who held slaves in Wisconsin. It is to his credit that he became also their emancipator. I speak of George Wallace Jones, now of Dubuque, Iowa, the last delegate in congress from Michigan Territory. To write in full the biography of General Jones — he was brigadier in the Territorial militia under Governor Dodge — would be to write a great part of the early history of southwestern Wisconsin.

One of the landmarks in that part of the state is Sinsinawa Mound, almost on the dividing line between Wisconsin and Illinois, and about six miles east of Dubuque, Iowa. In 1827 Mr. Jones, by advice of his physician, left his Missouri home and came northward. In March of that year he made "claim," after the custom of those times, to a piece of land. This he afterwards secured by title from the United States government, being the first man to prove up pre-emption rights in the Mineral Point land-office,— opened about 1836,— and thus the first to enter therein a quarter-section of land.

The noble "mound" already named stands upon the tract of land to which Mr. Jones made this early claim. Here he established a trading-post, and here he held about a "dozen or fifteen" slaves, brought from Missouri.' At some date, not remembered by General Jones, now an octogenarian, one of his negro men whom he calls Sam brought suit against him for wages. The case was tried before Judge Dunn, so well known in our early history. According to General Jones's recollection the judge charged the jury that the negro's legal status was determined by the statute of the state whence he had been brought, and that

In 1822 Col. James Johnson, of Kentucky, took a lead-mine lease from the national government, and under strong military protection encamped with a party of negro slaves where Galena now stands, and commenced operations on the most extensive scale yet known in the lead country. Several of the miners who followed on his heels into the Galena (or "Fever River" district) had slaves. In 1836, a careful annalist records that across the Mississippi river in Missouri there were fully two thousand men employed in lead-mining, "miners, teamsters and laborers of every kind (including slaves)." Some of these were farmers who, with their slaves, spent only their spare time in the mines.—R. G. T.

consequently he could not be party to a suit. Such a ruling does not seem consistent with the fact that a jury was summoned. It may be that the old gentleman's memory is at fault; and the suggestion of an eminent member of the Milwaukee bar has led to the thought that perhaps the judge held that General Jones's financial obligation to the negro was determined by the relation which in lieu of a contract had existed between them in the state whence they both came. Widely different as are these possible rulings of the court, the result to the unfortunate negro, as far as the immediate object of his suit was concerned, was practically the same. To adopt the language of a certain real or supposed country newspaper, "He succeeded in getting nothing." Probably he was already practically free; and about 1842 General Jones emancipated all whom he had held in slavery. Strictly speaking, this action on his part was but the recognition of a right which he knew they already possessed. Practically, it was very likely the breaking-up of an establishment which had been held together by the bonds of kindness and mutual good will.

General Jones, who speaks with great frankness of his own holding of slaves in Wisconsin, tells us also of like action on the part of Governor Dodge. Yet the cases are not precisely alike, for Dodge, before removing to Wisconsin, called together his negroes and promised freedom after five years' service to such of them as would go with him to his proposed new home. This he established only a few miles from the site whereon was afterwards built the little city of Dodgeville. He more than fulfilled his promise, for at the appointed time he not only set his negroes free, but also gave each man forty acres of land and a yoke of oxen.

Another of the living witnesses to the fact of slavery in Wisconsin is ex-Judge Joseph Trotter Mills, of Lancaster. Among his early cases was one brought to compel a so-called master to set free a colored man held in Grant county as a slave. The deed of manumission executed on this occasion is, the honored judge thinks, the only document of the kind on record in our state. In 1834, when he became

one of the founders of the Cumberland Presbyterian (now the Congregational) church of Prairie du Chien, young Mills protested against the sin of slavery, for one of the brotherhood, Andrew Cochrane, held slaves in Missouri. Of this church, David Lowrey was the first pastor.

But there was one case of the actual holding of a slave at Prairie du Chien itself. It was that of a mulatto named Day. He attracted the attention of the late Rev. Alfred Brunson, who, thinking that Day had a mind to be useful in pastoral or mission service, raised money and secured the mulatto's freedom. But he proved either to be unfit for the service desired of him, or unwilling to enter into it, and the investment from the missionary point of view proved to be a total loss. This event seems to have been a matter of intense mortification to Dr. Brunson and of keen delight to his enemies.

But Platteville has the unpleasant distinction of being the only place in Wisconsin where slaves were not only actually held, but whence they were also returned to slave soil and to legal bondage. The latter case was that of two girls held by the wife of Rev. James Mitchell, a minister of the Methodist Episcopal church. When it became unsafe to try to keep them as slaves any longer in Wisconsin, they were taken to St. Louis. Intense feeling was aroused in Platteville by this shameful and illegal deed. From the ecclesiastical point of view, Wisconsin was then embraced within the limits of the Rock River conference. Before this body, accordingly, Mr. Mitchell was tried for kidnaping. He pleaded that he was not the owner of the slaves. Whether on this ground or not I cannot say, but by a small majority he secured acquittal.

Green Bay has place in our narrative, for the venerable Jeremiah Porter, D. D., of Beloit, remembers distinctly a mulatto girl who was held there as a slave. In later years Dr. Porter met her as a free woman. According to his wish, no name save his own is given in connection with this case.

John Myers, of Platteville, who gave me most of the



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facts I have mentioned concerning the two slave girls of that place, tells of another case in which it is best that no names be given; for the relation was probably that of voluntary rather than of enforced servitude. Yet Mr. Myers thinks that when the census of 1840 was taken, the person was reported as a slave.

With the single exception known to Dr. Porter, these slaves were all brought to Wisconsin in the first of the two great currents of early immigration that came hither. This was from the south, the older west,—Kentucky and Tennessee were then considered to be western rather than southern states,—and from Missouri. It was by way of the Mississippi that most of these emigrants reached Wisconsin. That a few of them brought slaves is not a matter of surprise. Many, like Rev. David Lowrey, Judge Mills, and a personal friend of the writer, the late Benjamin Kilbourn, of Jamestown,—a type of men less known but not less earnest,—came with an abhorrence of human bondage. Samuel Mitchell, first pastor of the Methodist Episcopal church of Platteville, who, though a native of Virginia, emancipated his slaves on becoming a Christian, certainly put to shame his less worthy son already named. Governor Dodge was another man who did better than his son. Both were in the United States senate, the former from Wisconsin, the latter from Iowa, when the Wilmot proviso came before that body. The son, Augustus C. Dodge, voted against it; the father in its favor.

The second of the two great streams of early immigration hither came by way of the Great Lakes, and for the most part from New England and New York. It was distinctively anti-slavery in sentiment. Among the men who formed part of this movement were many who in later years resisted manfully the abominable fugitive slave law. But against human slavery itself, and its more immediate effects, the abolitionists who came hither from the south made, here and elsewhere, an earlier fight, and against greater odds won victory.